1. The Structure of the War Experience

THE DISCONTINUITIES OF WAR

It would be difficult to find any war in which participants did not claim that the actualities of combat had in some way altered their character. What is astonishing about the First World War is the persistence and consistency of this claim, even in the depths of personal and generational disillusionment. In August 1914 the expectation of a profound and precipitate maturation drove many young men to the recruiting offices. Such a transformation of character was cited as fact in many letters sent home from the front, as when one German volunteer writes, "No one will come out of this war who has not become a different person";[1] or, in another instance, "I am convinced that, coming back in one piece, one will have become different in every respect."[2] With the conclusion of the war, there were many debates over whether the veteran had been brutalized or ennobled, infantilized or matured by his war experience; but there was no debate over whether a deep and profound alteration of identity had taken place.

This change of identity in war – a consistent feature of the experience of the First World War in its several phases – is the subject of this study. In the chapters that follow I will define the

ways in which the experience of combat altered the status, self-conceptions, attitudes, and fantasy lives of participants. In this chapter, however, I would like to suggest some of the problems involved in approaching the subject from an historical perspective and to discuss the reasons for organizing the analysis in the way that I have. The discussion follows not a discrete series of themes or topics but what I feel is the structure of the war experience itself – a structure which underlay many differences of rank, nationality, and temperament, which guaranteed a unified war experience, and which fixed the relationship of the combatant to the society of his origin.

In approaching the question – what *was* the change which combatants felt took place within them? – it seemed immediately evident that this was a change of identity or personality that must perforce be examined with the tools of psychological analysis. But in initially attempting to do a psychohistory of the war, I encountered very real problems that were rooted both in the character of the war experience and the limitations of certain, commonly used models of subjective "change." Few, if any, veterans considered their war experience even comparable to their lives before or after the war. Many spoke of having inhabited two distinct worlds, of having seemed two distinct persons. Stuart Cloete, a British veteran, described how the combatant viewed his civilian existence during the war.

> Hard to believe. Impossible to believe. That other life, so near in time and distance, was something led by different men. Two lives that bore no relation to each other. That was what they felt, the bloody lot of them.[3]

The personality adapted to the vicissitudes of war seemed to be wholly incommensurate with that individual who had grown up in civilian society and was, with the conclusion of the war, expected to resume his civilian occupation and status. The psychic problems caused by the experience of war often lay in a profound sense of personal discontinuity.

On every level one finds that the war experience and the identity formed by it was placed "within brackets." David Jones felt so intensely the utter distinctness of his experience of war and peace that he entitled his fictionalized memoir of combat *In Pa-*

renthesis. Those who continued to be troubled psychically by their war experience were troubled by the sense of having lived two lives and of being unable to resolve the contradictions between them. Particularly those who had entered the war before they were twenty, and who regarded their experience as a special form of higher education, realized that they had learned skills which were unmarketable in civilian society. They were sensitized to dangers which did not exist in peacetime, as Robert Graves sheepishly reminded himself in 1919 after he picked himself up out of a roadside ditch where he had automatically taken cover from a car backfire. One of the most significant responses to the feeling of psychic and social estrangement from civilian life was the ritualization and memorialization of the war experience in veterans' groups that celebrated in songs and toasts to dead comrades the distinctiveness of their common identity.

The war experience was nothing if not an experience of radical discontinuity on every level of consciousness. This is what posed the most severe psychic contradictions for combatants, and what poses severe intellectual difficulties to anyone who wishes to understand the psychic effects of war using a model of mind that assumes the essential continuity of self and identity. Continuity often seems to be the *sine qua non* of identity. An experience which severs the thick "tissues of connectivity"[4] that weld separate events into a self is most often viewed as a *loss* of identity. Concepts of identity modeled on the process of maturation and cognitive development often presume something which war effaces: the notion that there is only one self and one sphere of existence.

Erik Erikson's theory of ego development is one that historians have found particularly useful in the construction of depth biographies. It is significant that one of Erikson's key concepts, that of ego-identity, was formed in war and in observation of men afflicted by war. Erikson developed this concept while working with cases of "combat fatigue" in the Pacific theatre during World War II. Essentially, ego-identity was a description of what men who had broken down in combat *lacked*.

> It was as if, subjectively, their lives no longer hung together and never would again. There was a central disturbance of

> what I then started to call ego-identity . . . This sense of identity produces the ability to experience oneself as something that has continuity and sameness.[5]

Here the effects of war upon personality can only be seen in a negative light as a disintegration of the identity that had been formed in a series of critical encounters with significant others – parents, lovers, and children. What Erikson has done is to construct a model of the self that is specifically a corrective to war, one that is designed to define therapeutically what men psychically wounded in combat can no longer believe of themselves – that they are "the same."

Any analysis of the war experience must ultimately seek to define the sources of discontinuity that shattered the sense of sameness normally thought to characterize the substrata of psychic life. In war men were "estranged" from their societies, and one must take this estrangement literally; they were "made" strange to the men and things of their past, and made strange to themselves. In the words of Gorch Jachs, who died in the offensives of March 1918,

> I, with my steel-hard nerves, can look the dead calmly in their crushed eyes, can hear badly wounded comrades groaning without collapsing and can do much more that I cannot say. In many ways I have become a riddle to myself, and often shudder at myself, am terrified at myself. And then again I feel that I still have the weakest, most pitying heart in the world.[6]

An analysis of war experience must confront directly this experience of being "made" strange. An examination of the identities formed in war must come to terms with the fact that these identities were formed beyond the margins of normal social experience. This was precisely what made them so lasting, so immune to erosion by the routines of postwar social and economic life, and so difficult to grasp with the traditional tools of sociological and psychological analysis.

Increasingly it became evident that the change in themselves cited by combatants was rooted not in specific, terrifying or horrifying war experiences, but in the sense of having lived through incommensurable social worlds – that of peace and that of war.

The sense of difference and strangeness which marked the relations of the veteran with his social origins derived from a species of structural disjunction, an imprecise fit between distinct forms of social life, which imposed upon the combatant a contradictory sense of his own status and value. Thus the question of a "change" of character necessarily became a question of how the distinctiveness of war experience and civilian experience was defined, comprehended, and portrayed.

One of the difficulties inherent in attempting to define what happens to men in war is that most of the constructs that are used in the articulation of group experiences have been generated in the attempt to understand normal social development and acculturated identities. The evanescent bonds and self-images formed in wars, revolutions, riots, carnivals, and New Year's parties are often historically invisible. They slip through the web of methods fashioned to describe the development of stable social and psychic entities. The analysis of war as a social experience and a human phenomenon has been skewed by the historian's interest in the "significant," and what is significant is almost by definition the events, persons, and transactions which contribute to the stabilization or destabilization of discrete social structures. It has generally been assumed that war has taken on its meaning once one has described the contribution of a particular war to the stability or instability of the societies and men who make it. It would be silly to argue this is not a significant issue, and I am not arguing that. I am only suggesting that the focus on the problems of social stability, class structure, and the values which ensure social cohesion inevitably colors our view of experiences which take place outside of stable institutions and class structures. They become recognizable only in so far as they function in terms of social structure.

Thus the two models that have commonly been used to define the relationship between war experience and normal social life – the "drive–discharge" model and the "cultural-patterning" model[7] – are both rooted in the assumption of the primacy of the social order, though they define the relationship of war to normal social life in quite different ways. It is worthwhile to review, in some detail, both of these models of explanation. They pervade much of our thinking about the relationship of war and

peace and about the identities formed in war. They articulate a set of assumptions, deeply rooted in European culture, that operated in both the expectations and disillusionment of those who fought in the First World War. Finally, it is against both of these views that I am arguing throughout this study.

The drive–discharge model is most commonly encountered in psychoanalytic theories of war.[8] But one can also see that it is implicit in Arno Mayer's view that both war and revolution release tensions that accumulate in modernizing societies.[9] Essentially, this model holds that organized spheres of conflict – war, revolution, and warlike sports – function to discharge drives which are blocked from expression in normal social life. War, in an image which seems native to the Age of Steam, provides a "safety valve" for aggressions, drives, and needs that cannot be used in working the social mechanism. Implicitly, the distinction between peace and war is a distinction between necessity and freedom, repression and release, the blockage of a vital force inherent in men and groups, and the "expression" of that force in acts which are normally taboo. It is a short step to a "functional" relationship between peace and war: If war provides an outlet for bottled aggressions that cannot be released without the destruction of social stability, *then* war is a regrettable but necessary feature of stable societies.

War, here, becomes a world of instinctual liberty that contrasts starkly with the social world of instinctual renunciation and the deferment of gratification. It follows that the personalities formed within this arena of discharge must necessarily suffer on the scales that measure civilized behavior, that is, the tolerance of frustration. They have either been "primitivized" or infantilized, or have never had an adequate opportunity to become civilized and matured. The combatant is, apparently, not trained for that instinctual renunciation that is the lot of every civilized adult.

The drive–discharge model is more than an explanation of war and what war does (or doesn't do) to men. It was a deeply rooted cultural assumption intrinsic to the sense of liberation that many experienced in August of 1914. One of the problems in any discussion of the experience of the First World War lies in understanding the unquestionably heartfelt, intense enthusiasm for war. It is clear that war mobilized a traditional, noneconomic,

and romantic vision of what war was and what it would mean. In Chapter 2, I have examined the roots of this traditional image to see how it was specified in the expectations of particular individuals. In 1914 those who went to war drew upon a fund of imagery that fixed the meaning and significance of a not-yet-experienced event and justified their celebration of war as a "liberation" from the constraints of social life. Both the fulfilment and the violations of this script were crucial in the "illumination" and disillusionment of combatants.

The drive–discharge model also describes the assumptions of those who, at the end of the war, feared that the returning veteran had been criminalized, revolutionized, or barbarized by his experience. Having been shaped in a climate of instinctual freedom, the frontsoldier might be incapable of resuming the habits of social discipline. This fear was expressed by many combatants themselves. Ludwig Lewinsohn, the Chairman of the Soldiers' Council of the 4th Army during the retreat of November 1918, felt that he might only be adding to the problems of reconstruction by leading a tribe of primitives back into the homeland. He feared that, at worst, the war had created a type that could never again adapt to the necessities of productive work. At best the soldier had been "depoliticized."

> After four and a half years of separation from the homeland many soldiers lacked any kind of political understanding. They had only one wish: peace and work. Opposite them stood the great mass of those brutalized in the field, men who were dishabituated to any kind of work; especially the youthful soldier who came into the army from the school bench, or from his apprenticeship, and who had not correctly grasped the concept of work, was drawn into sloth by long periods of idleness. Fantastic thoughts of distorted communism haunted their brains.[10]

Clearly it is impossible to dismiss the drive–discharge model out of hand. Its assumptions are inextricable from the expectations with which many millions of men went to war. Thus the notion that war was a field of instinctual liberation might itself be seen as a "cause" of war or at least of the enthusiasm for war. Many welcomed the conflict because it was commonly under-

stood to be the occasion for the expression, in action, of drives which had no normal social outlets. But the real questions are *why* did Europeans see the war in this light, and *how* did they specify this assumption in terms of concrete expectations. Equally, with the conclusion of conflict, the notion that war had been the playing field of insubordinate libido was a crucial feature in the anxieties which surrounded the figure of the returning veteran.

The salient inadequacies of this model lie in its unrealistic portrayal of war. It sees war wholly as an expression of aggressive drives, and this was not the war experienced by

> . . . man, infinitely small, running – affrighted rabbits from the upheaval of the shells, nerve-wracked, deafened; clinging to earth, hiding eyes, whispering, "oh God!"[11]

At best the war meant a new and more total pattern of repression to which millions of men, over a period of years, became habituated. Over the rules and inhibitions native to military institutions were layered the stark, unconquerable restrictions on movement imposed by technological realities, realities which made the war primarily a defensive war. The drive–discharge model defines war as an offensive, aggressive activity. It can explain the numerous breakdowns of men in modern war only by reference to the "guilt" incurred by men who kill, violating in war rules that govern their civilian conceptions of themselves.[12] But this ignores the fact that at least one-half of tactical thinking, and more than one-half of military activity, is occupied in frustrating the aggression of the enemy. In the First World War the defense ruled. The realities of war forced a curtailment of aggression, a ritualization of violence, and the holding back of hostile impulses.

> The present day trench warfare is, as I once heard it expressed "so damn impersonal" that the individual seldom has the privilege of giving physical vent to anger. . . . One cannot be enraged at the unseen line of men or the effectual bombardment from guns miles away – at least not with any amount of satisfaction.[13]

It was the frustration of aggression in war, due to the disappearance of the enemy and the necessities of entrenchment, which,

according to William Maxwell,[14] forced the combatant to turn his hostilities against "improper" targets: officers, the staff, or the "home." This act, and not the too-rare release of aggressions upon the enemy, often engendered a profound sense of guilt in combatants. In war men encountered repressions for which neither their social experience in civilian society nor their image of war had prepared them. It is in descriptions of the new psychic defenses necessitated by war and in evocations of the immobilizing, frustrating realities of fighting that one can see the emergence of a new "character" as well as a new social world.

An alternative to the notion of war as the discharge of aggressive drives is the cultural-patterning model. This, too, focuses upon the emotional experience of war as an experience of aggression, a focus that is much too narrow to encompass the cultural diversity and the varieties of experience undergone in war. But the cultural-patterning model points out something that should be self-evident: that restraints upon aggression learned in the process of socialization are not purely external rules and inhibitions that can be left behind with civilian clothes. If restraints upon aggression are truly learned, they become constituent elements in the personality of the citizen–soldier. The cultural-patterning model holds that individual aggression in war is a function of the rules and values which have governed aggression in social life. The individual who goes to war – if he is a "normal" member of his society – fears his own aggression as much as the aggression of the enemy, even though he may be less conscious of the cultural inhibitions that restrain him.

This understanding of the moral and psychic makeup of the citizen–soldier became doctrine in the American army after World War II, thanks largely to the work of S. L. A. Marshall, who interviewed thousands of men newly returned from the Pacific and European theatres. He discovered that even battle-hardened veterans of elite units – even in the most desperate straits – rarely shot directly at the enemy. Only a quarter of the men in combat units would employ their fire weapons effectively in combat.

> The Army cannot unmake [Western man] . . . It must reckon with the fact that he comes from a civilization in which aggression, connected with the taking of life, is prohibited and unacceptable. The teaching and ideals of that civilization are against

> killing, against taking advantage. The fear of aggression has been expressed to him so strongly and absorbed by him so deeply and pervadingly – practically with his mother's milk – that it is a part of the normal man's emotional make-up. This is his greatest handicap when he enters combat. It stays his trigger-finger even though he is hardly conscious that it is a restraint upon him.[15]

Marshall's insights into the motives and behavior of combatants in World War II are also valid for those who fought in the First World War. It was well known that attacks were broken not by companies or even squads of men, but by the few members of a group who survived the barrage and could bring themselves to fire on attackers. There are many examples in the war literature of officers who were reluctant to fire upon an enemy who had inadvertently exposed himself. This job was most often handed over to a man of the ranks.[16]

It is simply incontestable that those who fought on both sides of No Man's Land were, initially at least, the products of their respective cultures. In the trenches the cultural values that normally inhibit aggression were tested with a severity they rarely encountered in time of peace. The cultural-patterning model is a corrective to the excessively stark opposition of war and peace asserted by those who see war as the discharge of repressed aggressions. However, the cultural-patterning model is, par excellence, one that focuses upon the cultural and moral continuities that underlie the experience of peace and war. It is unable to account for something which was self-evident to veterans of the First World War, namely, that the war experience was dramatically "different" from normal social life and that they, as a consequence, were "different" too.

The view which regards the patterning of aggression in society as the source for the restraints upon aggression in war preserves the social character of war experience, but it does so by effacing the discontinuities which were self-evident to combatants. The cultural inhibitions on violence explain, perhaps, the actions of the seventy-five percent of combatants who were passive in combat, but not the behavior of the twenty-five percent upon whom the fate of a battle rested. These latter could only be